

## Testimony for Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

September 26, 2006

Anna C. Salter, Ph.D.

My name is Anna Salter and I am a psychologist specializing in the area of sex offender assessment and treatment. I received my Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology and Public Practice from Harvard in 1978, and I have worked in the field of sex offender assessment and treatment for approximately 20 years.

I have written three academic books on sex offenders and their victims: Treating Child Sex Offenders: A Practical Guide (1988), Transforming Trauma: A Guide to Understanding and Treating Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse (1995), and Predators: Pedophiles, Rapists and Other Sex Offenders. Who They Are, How They Operate and How We Can Protect Ourselves and Our Children (2003). In addition, I have produced two video-tapes: Truth, Lies and Sex Offenders and Sadistic and Nonsadistic Sex Offenders: How They Think, What They Do. Both have been widely used to train professionals. Finally, I also write mysteries, designed not only to entertain but to provide a more accurate picture of both sex offenders and victims for the general public. My latest mystery, Prison Blues, was nominated for an Edgar Allen Poe award.

Currently, I work half time for the Wisconsin Department of Corrections. I also do sexual predator exams for civil commitment of sex offenders in Iowa and

sometimes other states. I testify in legal cases involving sex offenders, and I train throughout the country and abroad. I have trained clinicians, police, judges, correctional staff, probation and parole agents, mental health professionals, child protection workers and others in forty-six states and ten countries. In 1997 I won the Significant Achievement Award from the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers. This is given to one person in the field each year, either in this country or abroad.

For my testimony today, I elected to show a brief excerpt of an interview with a sex offender describing the process he goes through when he decides to molest a child. This process includes methods of seducing the child and ways of fooling his parents. It was my belief that the committee has no doubt had a great deal of testimony from professionals, but likely far less contact with the offenders themselves. No one speaks as powerfully about the process of child seduction and parental deception as the offenders do.

This interview was done in a state prison. Permission was obtained from the prison officials at that site to approach the offenders and ask if they would be willing to be interviewed on camera for a training film. "Joe"<sup>1</sup> gave his permission and signed a written consent form. It specified that I may use the film for educational purposes, but he did not give his permission for me to use the film on TV therefore I requested that it not be filmed today. It also specified that he would be anonymous on film, and that I would not release information about his identity or whereabouts.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a pseudonym.

In this video, Joe describes sophisticated for techniques for gaining the child's trust and for keeping the parents suspicion down. In other parts of the interview, which I am not showing for brevity's sake, he admits that he had as many as a hundred boy victims. Most of the parents of these children were so convinced that he was a good person, and certainly not a child molester, that when he was arrested they supported him. Many would not let their own children be interviewed by police and some continued to write him in prison.

After this film was completed Joe was released from prison and relocated to a city in the same state. He approached a minister after service in a church one Sunday, asking him if his church took ex-cons. The minister replied that they did, so long as the ex-con was truly repentant. Joe replied that he was, that he had been imprisoned for passing a "cold check." Of course, Joe had actually been imprisoned for child molestation. He also told the minister that he had discovered Christ while in prison and that he read the bible every day. There was a hymn that he dearly loved, he said, and he knew that whatever church was playing that hymn, that was a sign from God that that was the church for him. The minister's church, he went on, had been playing the same hymn when he had walked by that morning. He offered for the minister to call the prison to check on him, and gave him the correct name of the prison, but the minister did not do so. He felt, apparently, that Joe's offering it meant that what he said was true.

Over time Joe – who was a professional musician – took over the children's choir at the church. At this point some parents questioned having a

felon running the children's choir. In response, the minister inquired at the prison. When authorities caught up with Joe for violation of parole – he was not supposed to have any contact with children – they found he had run the same scam on two different churches and was operating in both at the same time. Both scams included the line that the church was playing his favorite hymn when he walked by. I use this example simply to highlight the cleverness of some offenders and their ability to plan.

By my use of the example of Joe and by my testimony in general, however, I do not mean to say that sex offender treatment is always ineffective. On the contrary, a large scale meta-analysis by Smith (2002) and others have shown beyond a doubt that for criminal offenders in general, treatment is the only thing that does work. Incarceration alone at best does not reduce recidivism and, at worse, actually increases it. Longer sentences almost surely increase recidivism, compared to shorter ones. By contrast, every meta-analysis that has ever been done, to my knowledge, has found a positive effect for treatment in reducing recidivism.

Regarding sex offender treatment specifically, a meta-analysis by Hanson (2002) of forty-two studies found that sex offender treatment reduced recidivism by about forty percent. While not perfect and a long way from it, treatment that can reduce sexual offense recidivism by forty percent will make an enormous difference to victims.

However, Joe is one of those unlikely to benefit from treatment. For those who do not benefit, and who continue to offend, I have little faith that educating

the public will be sufficient. When Joe turns on the charm, he is a likeable guy. The average person does not distinguish between likeability and trustworthiness. They believe that anyone who is “nice,” who appears to be caring, and whom they like, cannot be a sex offender. “Niceness is a decision,” Gavin de Becker wrote, “not a character trait” (De Becker 1997). But most people simply do not believe this. The average person believes that public behavior is an indicator of private behavior and so it is for most people, but not for the Joe’s of this world.

In all my interviews with offenders in prison, I have rarely met any offender who got caught for everything he did, but even more chilling, virtually all had victims along the way who had reported him to their parents. The typical parental response was to tell the child that “Joe loves you. Joe wouldn’t do anything like that. There must be some mistake,” and the report rarely went further. In Joe’s case, both of these things happened. He had far more victims than he had been caught for, and children had occasionally reported him along the way, only to find that their parents did not believe them.

The world of online predators is even more pernicious. Parents never meet the online predators, and therefore the offender only has to deal with the child’s judgment. Too, the problem of finding and meeting children is solved. Through the internet, offenders can approach hundreds of children, widely separated geographically. Then too they can spend as much time with them as the child permits, without raising parental suspicion.

A study conducted by the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire found that twenty percent of adolescent users of

the Internet, ages ten to seventeen had received a sexual solicitation in the preceding year, and in a little over three percent of the cases, an offender had tried to contact them directly, i.e., outside the Internet (Finkelhor, Mitchell et al. 2001). Of course, these figures are an under-estimation of the problem, given that not all teenagers will admit to having been approached sexually on the Internet fearing that admitting it will lead to the loss of access.

But what makes these figures doubly chilling is the fact that a different study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that eight to thirteen-year-olds – the heaviest users of the Internet – spent approximately an hour a day on the Internet. Of that hour, roughly eleven minutes were spent in chat rooms. Eleven minutes and twenty percent of kids are getting approached sexually.

I have attached a book chapter of mine on child molesters from *Predators*, and I would be happy to answer questions.

## Bibliography

- De Becker, G. (1997). The Gift of Fear. New York, Little, Brown and Company.
- Finkelhor, D., K. Mitchell, et al. (2001). Youth Internet Safety Survey. University of New Hampshire, Crimes Against Children Research Center.
- Hanson, R. K., A. Gordon, et al. (2002). "First Report of the Collaborative Outcome Data Project on the Effectiveness of Psychological Treatment for Sex Offenders." Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment **14**(2): 169-194.
- Salter, A. C. (1988). Treating Child Sex Offenders and Victims: A Practical Guide. Newbury Park, CA, Sage.
- Salter, A. C. (1995). Transforming Trauma :A Guide to Understanding and Treating Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse. Newbury Park, CA, Sage.
- Salter, A. C. (2003). Predators: Pedophiles, Rapists and Other Sex Offenders, Who They Are, How They Operate and How We Can Protect Ourselves and Our Children. New York, Basic Books.
- Smith, P., C. Goggin, et al. (2002). The effects of prison sentences and intermediate sanctions on recidivism: General effects and individual differences, Available from Solicitor General of Canada's Internet Site <http://www.sgc.gc.ca>.